

THE
CARPENTER
AND SOME EDUCATED GENTLEMEN

BY DR. ALEXANDER IRVINE



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LONDON : EVANS BROTHERS LIMITED

Price 1/- Net

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ALEXANDER IRVINE

AUTHOR OF "MY LADY OF THE CHIMNEY
CORNER," "SOULS OF POOR FOLK," ETC.



EVANS BROTHERS LIMITED
MONTAGUE HOUSE, RUSSELL SQUARE, LONDON, W.C. 1

1921

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10, DOWNING STREET,
WHITEHALL, S.W.1.

May 17th, 1921.

DEAR DR. IRVINE,—

Great Britain is under a deep obligation to you for your generous and patriotic services rendered during the last eighteen months of the war in holding meetings and giving addresses, at the request of the Government, to the troops at the front, in France and Belgium, for the special purpose of imparting fresh courage and cheer to our fighting warriors.

You displayed unique gifts in pursuing this great work, which, with your own experience as a soldier, caused you to be received with warm appreciation by officers and men everywhere.

You subsequently visited the chief industrial centres of Great Britain, where your life-long connection and experience with Labour movements, supported by your native eloquence and earnestness, secured a welcome hearing for you everywhere.

It is right and fitting to say that these valuable services were rendered by you without any personal emolument, and you have my cordial good wishes for continued and increasing success in your public-spirited career.

Yours sincerely,

DR. ALEXANDER IRVINE.

To
ROBERT HAZEN IRVINE.

THE OCCASION

ADDRESSES to graduating classes are usually rather dull pabulum. The usual speaker talks to students who have completed a college course as if they had just dropped from the planet Mars, in a band-box, and were about for the first time to be instructed in the habits and customs of the people who inhabit the earth.

The speakers are usually hand-picked mortals who have acquired a reputation for having something to say, and knowing how to say it. Most of the men I have heard at these dull, heavy ceremonies were apostles of the obvious who were typical products of the "passionless pursuit of passionless knowledge." Men who thought or worked athwart the usual lines of progress were not invited. The prophet is not without honour, save in a college pulpit !

This story is about a different kind of a ceremony, and a vastly different kind of address.

About one hundred and fifty students arranged a farewell dinner. They were about to go out into various parts of the world. As a body of men who had been intimately associated with each other for four years, they desired to celebrate the occasion in such a way that in the years to come they would look back upon it with pleasure.

The affair was held in a banqueting hall, known the world over for its elegance and beauty. The

men were arrayed in full evening dress. Ensconced in a balcony an orchestra rendered a programme of classical music. The menus were exquisitely printed in gold and colours—the colours of the university.

One item on the programme was different—different from any other programme ever arranged by a graduating class. The speaker was a joke. He was selected as such. He was a Professor whose opinion of college addresses was well known. He had a poor opinion of pious piffle. He had courage to say so, and his aversion—his pet aversion—was well known.

The original idea of the committee was to omit the address altogether. The Professor's selection was a compromise. It was believed that he would turn the invitation down. If any one had thought for a moment that there was the slightest chance of his acceptance, he would never have been invited. To the amazement of the committee, he accepted. They looked at each and laughed. It was a great joke!

ATHWART THE LINES

DESPITE his reputation for entertaining “odd” notions, he was one of the most popular teachers in the university. He had a keen sense of humour. He enjoyed a joke on the students or on his subject—which was Literature—but enjoyed it equally well when the fun was at his own expense. In his wit and humour there was no sting. He laughed with people—never at them. He was the only Professor I ever knew who participated in and enjoyed spinning tops and shooting marbles with the Seniors when in the spring-time they engaged in the traditional sport. He did it because he liked it, and could see no reason why age—he was forty-five then—should rob him of this joy.

From an orthodox educationist's point of view, I suppose he was a heretic. His methods were unique. I shall never forget a talk he gave us once on the Literature of the age of Victoria. Turning around in his chair, and pointing to the bare wall behind him, he said: “I want you to imagine that on the wall there, there is the big white face of a clock. Every minute represents a year. The hands are at twelve. Now watch the big hand go slowly around.” We watched. I see that clock now, I hear the names of books and authors during the age of Victoria. Around and around he went in the most fascinating lecture I ever heard.

Once a month we voted on what book he would expound. This was an extra. Something we all wanted. One month we voted for "David Copperfield." His introductory talk on it was startling. "Don't think of this book as a book," he said; "think of it as a play! I am going to ring up the curtain and let the players walk across the stage, just so that we may say 'How do you do?' to them."

Part of that speech no man who heard it will ever forget. "The next character, if I am any judge of human nature," he said, "is more closely allied intellectually to the majority of this class than any man I know in fiction—Gentlemen, Mr. Wilkins Micawber!"

He assigned to each of us a character in the book, and when we arose to read, we impersonated the character. With the keen instinct of the true teacher, he knew what would happen to the man who had to imitate Uriah Heep, so he made us take our turn in the character of the hypocrite.

Thus he made Literature a living thing, and we loved it because it was part of life.

One of his odd notions was that modern education did not educate at all. Education to him was equipment for life. Its object should be to so train a man's mind that he could go through life with the largest possible amount of co-operation with his fellows, and with the least possible degree of friction. When he asked how many of us were going to become carpenters or blacksmiths, we laughed.

"Why do you laugh?" he would ask. We didn't know.

“ You see, gentlemen,” he would say calmly and seriously, “ what we do create here is the academic mind. The academic mind deals with abstractions, and when you leave here you go out into a real world—a world of realities—you discover that your abstractions fit into the realities as square pegs fit into round holes.”

He would lay his hand flat on the table in front of him and, looking at us, ask : “ Why can’t this table be measured with a quart measure ? ”

We could grasp that. We answered, and he drove home the point : “ Neither can life be measured by a book ! Life must be measured by life ! ”

Only those who have occasionally lost their way on the barren moorlands of theological speculation can ever fully appreciate the full meaning of such a phrase. It became, to me at least, like a mariner’s compass to a ship at sea.

INSTEAD OF A SPEECH

“GENTLEMEN,” the Professor began, when he had been introduced, “I have never made a speech in my life. Don’t be alarmed, I am not going to make one now. I am going to say something, and while in the act, I will follow the directions laid down by Luther: ‘Stand up straightly, speak out boldly, sit down quickly!’”

“We are in one of the world’s greatest banqueting halls. Belshazzar’s hall, compared to this, was a lodging on a third floor back. No such art existed in those days as we see around us here. No such viands graced his board. We live in a new age, an age of art, artcraftmanship and luxury. From the remotest corners of the earth came the things on this table. From the lowest forms of day labour to the highest aspects of fine art we have around us at least a hundred forms of human work.

“For instance, take this beautiful tablecloth. What exquisite workmanship! It involves weaving—to go no further back—bleaching, smoothing and designing. It is damask linen, pleasing and beautiful to the eye. I want to ask you a question. Is there any one here who, from personal experience, knows anything about the labour involved? Have you ever touched the making of linen at any stage? I am quite serious, gentlemen. If any of you have, I would

ask you to say so." There was absolute silence. "I am right, then, in assuming that it is utterly beyond your ken.

"Let me draw attention to the exquisite examples of pottery here. Surely we are all agreed that the men and women who produce such things are artists. What a joy it must be for a man to hold such a piece of work in his hand and say, 'I made it!' Many forms of labour are involved here also—the digging of clay, the carting, fashioning, burning, baking, painting and finishing. If there is a man present who has ever contributed in any way to such work, I would like to know about it. No one!

"Perhaps some of you know about cut glass. Great labour, great art are also necessary here. It is very rare, very costly. These beautiful things did not drop out of the clouds. Their origin is mysterious to us, but not to the folk who spend their lives in such work. What sort of lives do they live? Are they as human as we are? Do we ever meet them in social life? I will not detail the processes. I would be surprised if any one here had ever been associated with such labour. I assume no one has."

In like manner he spoke of the silver, and dwelt somewhat at length on mining and the life of the miner. Nothing escaped his notice. He called attention to the carpet and rugs on the floor, to the curtains and drapery of the great windows; to the mural decorations executed by the greatest of living decorators. There was a rich fresco around the hall. He drew attention to it. At every turn he asked the same pointed question, and to every question there

was the same negative reply, indicated by silence—only silence.

It began to look as if the whole thing was a frost and a kill-joy proceeding. Suddenly he returned to the great table, heavily laden with beautiful things. "Most of you spent some years in the study of Botany. Well, we have on the table quite a display of cut flowers—don't be afraid, I am not going to test your knowledge, but I would be surprised if any of you, even after years of study, could completely classify what we see and enjoy on this table!"

There was a disposition to laugh, but even the rehearsal for a smile was wiped from every face around the table when in serious quiet tones he said, "Perhaps you are to be congratulated that you are at an age when a sense of humour covers a multitude of sins, but personally I can't enjoy that which gives me pain. I am a representative university man seriously asking myself and you whether the thing we call education is really education at all?"

The silence became a little oppressive. The men were thinking. Each man was thinking for himself, and all of them were wondering how they could balance the little they knew with the number of things they knew nothing about.

"Perhaps," he continued, "I should have put you more at your ease by informing you that I know as little about these things as you do. I never knew the joy of making and fashioning things with my own hands. Here we are, then, a group of men on whom a university has set its stamp. We produce nothing we eat; we are ignorant of the origin of the things we

see. We are as helpless as children in a big world of real things, and truth compels us to confess that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the chief motive of a college education is to escape actual participation in just such work as gives, or ought to give, joy to the worker.

“A timekeeper performs a useful function, so does a cash-register, but the function of education is not to turn out cash-registers or timekeepers! The president of a great university has ventured the opinion that if ten bachelors of art were shipwrecked in mid-ocean they could not build a pontoon to save their lives. They would be equally helpless in a critical emergency where practical knowledge of the ordinary things around us was imperatively necessary.

“We do not solve the problem by stating it or defining it. No progress can be made by merely locating or apportioning blame. The creative mind, the constructive imagination must get us out of the slough. Meantime, healthy-minded men must protest. With that end in view I accepted your invitation. This is not a speech. I have never made one in my life. It is a protest and a suggestion.

DOES THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATE ?

“**E** DUCATION must prepare and equip men and women for the duties, privileges, and responsibilities of life. A smattering of languages, of mathematics, of history, of science, constitute but a very small portion of such equipment.

“The main purpose of a college course is not to turn out bosses, gaffers, timekeepers, and human cash-registers.

“Most of you are destined to be masters of men. You will be the organisers, overseers, and directors of men who produce things. When you see men doing the necessary work of the world—making, shaping, fashioning, producing useful and beautiful things, I would like you to remember that they are performing a far higher social service than the men who merely keep their accounts or speculate on their labour. They are making an infinitely nobler contribution to the happiness of mankind than those men who merely clip coupons or live by the sweat of other brows than their own.

“Why should a university perpetuate a revolt against Nature in which the man who does no useful work at all is considered a gentleman and the man who by his labour feeds the world, clothes the world, and adds to its comfort, health, wealth, and beauty, be considered low caste? Why should it be considered an unthinkable thing that a man should spend some years at a university in order to fit himself for the career of a carpenter—a blacksmith, or a

bricklayer? By whose standard of judgment does a college man deem it unworthy, if not degrading, to handle tools?

“Here you are, a large group of men just graduated from a famous university. You are Bachelors of Art—whatever that may mean—you are surrounded with all the luxury, art, and convenience of the highest form of civilisation, and you are as ignorant of the processes by which these things were produced as you were when you were in your cradles. I am as ignorant as you are. We produce nothing we eat; we could not even lend a hand in the making of anything we see around us, and yet we are stamped as educated men. The university approves of us. Who will approve of the university?

“I am not blaming you. That would be unfair. We have a system. Yesterday you were its victims; to-day you have become its custodians. For four years it was imposed upon you; henceforth you impose it upon others. The real things, the things that are fundamental to life and character, are not in the curriculum. The system encourages a vague hope that somehow, in some mysterious way you will acquire these things by your own initiative, your own sense of need. Some men feel that need acutely. Some feel it not at all and become prigs and sciolists.

“The assumption that your certificates of graduation entitle you to be numbered in a superior class rests on a flimsy foundation. You go out into a real world of real things, a world where success will not be measured, as it is here, by a good memory, nor failure by a bad one.

THE CARPENTER

“**T**HE one cardinal thought I had in mind when I accepted this invitation, was to remind you that the highest form of culture and refinement known to mankind was intimately associated with tools and manual labour. In order to do that the more effectively, I want to draw on your imaginations. I want to present to you a picture which accords with the facts of history and experience.”

He pushed his chair back and stood a few feet from the table. His face betrayed deep emotion. His voice became wonderfully soft and irresistibly appealing. The college men had been intensely interested, they were now spellbound. He raised his hand and went through the motions of drawing aside a curtain.

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“Gentlemen,” he said, “may I introduce to you a young Galilean Carpenter—Jesus of Nazareth!” It was a weird act. The silence became oppressive. As if addressing an actual person of flesh and blood, he continued: “Master, may I ask you, as I have asked these young men, whether there is anything in this room that you could make with your hands?”

There was a brief pause, only a moment or two, then with the measured stride of an Oriental he walked to the end of the table, and taking hold of the corner of the damask linen tablecloth, he laid bare the corner and a leg of the carved oaken table. In that position, with the cloth in his hand, he looked into the faces of the men and said: “The Master says ‘Yes, I could make the table—I am a Carpenter.’”



MANY THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE ARE FAMILIAR WITH DR. IRVINE'S EVER-CHARMING "MY LADY OF THE CHIMNEY CORNER," AND HIS NEW BOOK, "THE SOULS OF POOR FOLK," CONTINUES THE THEME WHICH HE BEGAN IN HIS FORMER BOOK. HE GIVES SOFTLY COLOURED PICTURES OF HIS EARLY LIFE IN ANTRIM, AND THE CENTRAL, MOST LOVABLE FIGURE IS STILL, AS IN "MY LADY OF THE CHIMNEY CORNER," HIS MOTHER. THESE PICTURES, TOLD AS DR IRVINE TELLS THEM, ARE FULL OF PATHOS AND HUMOUR DELICATELY TOUCHED IN BY A MASTER HAND